

RECOLLECTIONS

... OF ...

ABRAHAM LINCOLN



FROM AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY SENATOR JAMES
HARLAN BEFORE THE HARLAN CLUB OF IOWA
WESLEYAN COLLEGE, APRIL 28, 1898

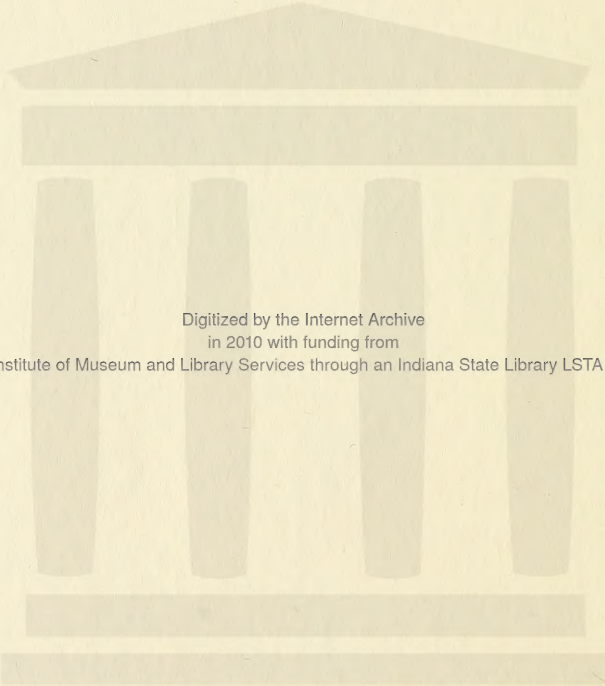
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Recollections of Abraham Lincoln.

I never saw Abraham Lincoln until after his election to the office of President of the United States, although through conversation with his intimate personal friends and the perusal of his numerous public speeches I seemed myself to have known him well for many years.

My first personal interview with him occurred February 23rd, 1861, at Willard's Hotel in Washington, the day of his arrival at the capital city shortly prior to his inauguration on the fourth day of the following March.

He and his family occupied apartments on the second floor in the south front of that great house of public entertainment. The room in which he stood when I met him and the passages and stairways leading to it were crowded with people;—each one, apparently, intent on obtaining an opportunity to say a few words to him **privately**. The purpose and character of these private words I leave to your conjecture. He was literally overwhelmed by a multitude of professed friends and admirers. And some of them, no doubt, were sincere and unselfish.

I called only to pay my respects, and had no conversation with him at this time, other than the exchange of the usual civilities.

If I should undertake to describe him as I then

saw him in this phenomenal crowd of his adulating countrymen I would say:—

Abraham Lincoln was an unusually tall man, though he did not seem slender. He appeared to be as lean and his muscles as hard as those of a prize-fighter. He was obviously a very strong, powerful man, physically capable of immense endurance. His eyes slightly receded, were about normal in size and, according to my recollection, gray in color,—with no marked expression, except pensiveness and truthfulness. His head was large, both longitudinally and perpendicularly, with a tall and ample forehead. His hair was dark brown, without any tendency to baldness. His head, when he was in repose, drooped slightly forward, and his whole countenance was pensive to sadness. In conversation it would kindle into brightness; and, with increased earnestness, become luminous. He impressed everyone with his frankness and manifest candor, and conscious manly strength, free from the slightest manifestation of egotism. No one could look at him and doubt his perfect honesty, sincerity and kindness.

As I have sometimes heretofore said, and continue to think, no one can know a married man thoroughly, who does not also know his wife. I must add a few descriptive words of Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of Abraham Lincoln.

She was fair, of about medium height, but,

standing near her husband by comparison seemed short. Her quiet, gentle manners and firm womanly bearing impressed everyone with the conviction that she was a well-educated, cultured lady, accustomed to the usages of society and with ability to take care of herself. She was a Kentuckian.

Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln were, at that date, the parents of three living children about whom, perhaps, I ought to say a word or two; because the children brought up in a family usually reflect, like a mirror, the character of their parents.

The oldest, Robert Todd Lincoln, was a youth of seventeen or eighteen years;—well developed physically, a strong, healthy, resolute, sensible looking fellow; without the slightest appearance of ostentation or family pride on account of his father's election to the Presidency.

The second child, William Lincoln, was probably about twelve years of age. He was a beautiful boy; intelligent, polite, observant, careful of the comfort of others and courtly in his manners; so much so as to attract the attention and affection of everybody with whom he came in contact.

The third child, Thomas Lincoln,—usually called "Tad,"—was a small boy, probably not more than seven or eight years old. He was apparently under little restraint, overflowing with the joys

of his young life and almost constantly near and clinging to his father who never appeared to be annoyed by his freaks and capers.

The foregoing is a crude pen-picture of Abraham Lincoln and his family as they appeared to me the first time I ever saw them.

I saw Abraham Lincoln the second time seven days later,—Saturday, March 2nd, 1861. A page came to me at my desk in the Senate Chamber and said, "The President-Elect is in the President's room and wishes to see you." I confess that I felt a little flurried by this announcement. I had not been accustomed to being "called on" by Presidents of the United States. Hence, to gain a little time for self composure, I said to the little page, "How do you know that the President-Elect wishes to see me?" "Oh," said he, "his messenger came to the door of the Senate Chamber and sent me to tell you." All right," said I, "You may tell the President's messenger that I will call immediately;" which, of course, I did without needless dleay.

I was received by the President in person, who, after the ordinary greetings, offered me a seat and seated himself near me. No one else was in the room. He commenced the conversation by saying, in a half playful, half serious tone and manner, "I sent for you to tell me whom to appoint as members of my Cabinet." I responded, saying,

“Mr. President, as that duty under the Constitution devolves, in the first instance, upon the President, I have not given to the subject a serious thought; I have no names to suggest, and expect to be satisfied with your selections.”

He then said that he had about concluded to nominate Wm. H. Seward, of New York, for Secretary of State; Edward Bates, of Missouri, for Attorney General; Caleb B. Smith, of Indiana, for Secretary of the Interior; Gideon Wells, of Connecticut, for Secretary of the Navy; and Montgomery Blair, of Maryland, for Postmaster General; and that he thought he ought to appoint Simon Cameron, of Pennsylvania, and Salmon P. Chase, of Ohio, for the remaining two places but was in doubt which one to offer Mr. Cameron; and would like to have me express my opinion frankly on that point.

“Well,” said I, “Mr. President, if that is the only question involved I have not the slightest doubt that Mr. Chase ought to be made Secretary of the Treasury”—and then proceeded to mention, without hesitation or reserve, my reasons for this opinion. He thanked me cordially for my frankness, and I took my leave. This interview lasted probably about ten or fifteen minutes.

The third time I saw Abraham Lincoln was a few minutes before twelve o'clock noon, March 4th, 1861. He entered the Senate Chamber, arm

in arm with the out-going President, James Buchanan, and escorted by the Senate Committee of arrangement,—Senators Foot, of Vermont; Pearce of Maryland and Baker of Oregon. They seated themselves in front of the Secretary's desk, facing the body of Senators and invited guests.

After a few minutes delay they were escorted to a platform erected at the East front of the central Capitol building, preceded by the Supreme Court of the United States and followed by the Senate, its officers, and other high officials. Here the President-Elect met an immense audience, variously estimated at from fifty to one hundred thousand, standing compactly, on his right, left and in front, covering several acres of ground, to whom he delivered his inaugural address in a clear, distinct and musical voice which seemed to be heard and perfectly understood to the very outskirts of this vast concourse of his fellow citizens. At its conclusion he turned partly around to his left, facing the Justices of the Supreme Court and said, "I am now ready to take the oath prescribed by the Constitution;" which was then administered by Chief Justice Taney, the President saluting the Bible with his lips.

At that moment, in response to a signal, the batteries of field guns located a mile or so away commenced firing a national salute in honor of the Nation's new Chief. Mr. Buchanan, now a

private citizen, escorted President Lincoln to the Executive Mansion, followed by a multitude of people, and at the front door took leave for his home in Pennsylvania; during which the great audience dispersed and the Senators, returning to their Chamber, adjourned until the next day, awaiting Executive communications from the new President. The House of Representatives not being in session, legislative business could not be transacted.

From this date onward, during four years and over, I frequently saw the President on official business relating to appointments to office, both civil and military, the progress of the war, our foreign relations, and pending political campaigns. These interviews were usually very brief, and never occurred in relation to Department business unless I found it impractical to transact it satisfactorily with the head of the Department to which it properly pertained.

I so said to him in one of our early interviews. He seemed to appreciate my thoughtfulness in this respect and never manifested impatience with me on account of my frequent coming. He always granted my requests or took the trouble to show me their impracticability.

I sometimes met him as one of a coterie of Senators and Representatives who called in company to confer with him about measures of public policy

or methods of administration;—some of them desiring to obtain information and some of them to give the President advice. For as strange as it may seem to this generation, numerous Senators and Representatives thought themselves each to be more capable in practical statesmanship than Abraham Lincoln.

Several members of his Cabinet entertained like opinions of themselves. Mr. Seward, Secretary of State, soon after his appointment, proposed to the President, in a written memorandum, that he, Mr. Seward, should be made practically the actual Chief Executive; his orders and directions to be issued, of course, in the name of Abraham Lincoln; and this startling proposition was not, I think, the result of conscious inordinate ambition on the part of Mr. Seward. He no doubt honestly thought himself more capable of administering the Government than his official Chief.

The same was true of Mr. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, and he continued to think so as long as he remained at the head of that department. While so serving under Mr. Lincoln, he did not seem to think it incompatible with that relation to become an earnest candidate for the succession at the close of Mr. Lincoln's first term, and I have no doubt he seemed to himself to be influenced only by patriotic motives and honestly believed that the welfare of the country would be promoted

by his election instead of the re-election of Abraham Lincoln.

This opinion, on the part of members of his Cabinet, and numerous Senators and Representatives, was not so unreasonable as it may now seem, when seen in the light of impartial history. For some of them had had long and wide experience in official affairs and some great and successful business careers, while Abraham Lincoln had then had little experience in public matters; and, if some of them were over bumptious, it should be pardoned on account of their anxious solicitude over the condition of the country.

We were engaged in a life and death struggle against a large per cent of our own fellow citizens for the preservation of the Union and our free institutions. In spite of all the hundreds of thousands of armed soldiers in the field, the tide of battle was not always in our favor, and those who were in the thick of the fight, and bore the brunt of the battle, can hardly realize how we, who were striving to serve our country at Washington, were depressed and saddened by the partial failures, and temporary defeats,—how we grieved over the losses,—how we rejoiced over the victories, and craved final triumph.

Under these conditions, over modesty on the part of Senators and Representatives, as it seemed to them, would have been little less than a crime.

Hence I say again, that if some of our number were a little over earnest, it ought to be pardoned.

President Lincoln was fully aware of the prevalence of this sentiment and bore its manifestations with the greatest patience; though he expressed himself once in my presence, in his own quaint way, by this remark: "Everyone, admitting that his neighbor's ability may be equal in size to a silver dollar, thinks his own as large as a cart wheel."

But he always entered into these private conferences with entire frankness, stating fully the facts and reasons for acts performed and policies pursued, whose wisdom may have been doubted by his callers; and, generally, with such force as to silence his self-appointed counsellors. I will give a single case to illustrate:

Some time during the month of June, 1862, a self-appointed committee of Senators and Representatives called at the Executive Mansion to confer with President Lincoln on the subject of the enlistment of colored men to serve in the Union Army.

The public mind, at least in Republican circles, had become greatly agitated over the policy pursued by numerous generals commanding Union forces at the front, of excluding negroes from their lines and encampments; even facilitating their capture and return as slaves to rebel

masters; it being well known that colored men were in constant use by the rebels, in the performance of all sorts of labor and service incident to army life; in digging entrenchments, constructing breast works and fortifications; and that some of them were enrolled by the rebels, and compelled to bear arms with white comrades in what was called "bush-whacking" warfare; and that the three millions and more of these colored people that remained in domestic service and on the plantations in the rebel states were indirectly supporting the rebel cause, although all of them, both north and south, were thoroughly loyal to the Union.

It seemed obvious to the masses of the Union people that the rebels should be deprived of this support; and a majority of the Republican and war-Democratic Senators and Representatives concurred in this opinion.

I was one of these interviewers, and thoroughly believed that the time had come when, under God's good Providence, the negro race in this country had to be liberated and that the enlistment of a fair per cent of their able-bodied men to serve in and about the Union Army would be a long step in this direction; and if not brought about by the Government of the United States, it would be effected by the Confederates themselves, through the influence of the great nations of

Europe, under a promise of their recognition in that event as an independent nation; and that if this should happen a dissolution of the Union in my opinion would become inevitable and I so said to the President. All the others were equally frank and urgent.

The President listened to what each of us had to say on the subject with the deepest apparent interest, and the most profound thoughtfulness, until every subsidiary question was fully traversed, and then said:

“Gentlemen, I do not see my way clear to do as you advise me. Some time ago representative Union men from Kentucky, eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina called on me and said: ‘If the Government will furnish us arms and ammunition, we will not only protect ourselves, but will also drive the enemies of the Union into the gulf states.’ I believed that they were in earnest, and would undertake to do what they promised, and I have put two hundred thousand muskets and rifles into their hands. I still think them honest, earnest, courageous Union men. But I fear, if I should now do what you advise, the major part of these two hundred thousand muskets and rifles would be turned against us and that, if it should occur, that would do us more harm than the negroes could do us good. But you may be right, and I may be wrong; and, although I cannot do as

you think I should, perhaps Mr. Hamlin (the Vice President) could. I am willing to get out of the way and let him try it."

He said this with the utmost seriousness, and the most undoubted abnegation of himself. None of us doubted that he meant what he said. And all instantly rose to our feet, saying all around as with one voice, "No, no, Mr. President; none of us would entertain such a thought for a moment. We all understand that you occupy a position from which you can see all over the field, while we see only a part of it. But we felt it to be our duty to call and talk over the subject, expressing freely our several opinions."

He thanked us cordially and we took our leave; but we did not agree with him in opinion as to the magnitude of the danger he apprehended. A large per cent of the Union men in the border states, thus supplied with arms, were already in the Union army, side by side with Union soldiers from the North and West as comrades. Their blood was up. We did not think it likely that they would tamely submit to be dominated by their disloyal neighbors for such a cause. Moreover, that part of our country was now largely under the guns of our Union troops.

I determined, therefore, on the first opportune occasion, to traverse the whole subject in the Senate, where I would have ample time for its elucida-

tion; which I did July 11th, following,—the Senate then having under consideration a bill to enroll the militia of the United States, preliminary to a draft, to strengthen the army. After an elaborate discussion, continuing several days, the Senate incorporated a clause directing the enrollment of colored men, the same as white men, as eligible for military service, which became a law.

This measure was also thoroughly discussed in the newspapers throughout the country. The drift of public opinion was clearly in favor of this policy. To what extent this expression of the legislative will emphasized by public opinion may have influenced the President, God only knows; but it is now known that he formulated an emancipation proclamation the latter part of that month which, for some reason, was withheld until September 22nd, following, when he issued his preliminary or conditional proclamation, which was made positive January 1st, 1863.

Some of the evil effects anticipated by President Lincoln from the enlistment of colored troops and from his emancipation proclamation, with the enforcement of the draft, were realized. The most serious were the loss, at the pending election, of our Republican majority in the House of Representatives; the organization of secret lodges of what was known as “Knights of the Golden Circle” all over the loyal states; and actual insur-

rections in many places, including our own beloved Iowa, which had to be suppressed by Union troops, drawn in some cases from the front.

Although it seems marvelously strange now, yet the strongest opposition to the enlistment of negro troops came from the Union army itself. The "copperheads," as they were called, industriously circulated the falsehood that their enlistment would make it necessary for white soldiers to "bunk" with negroes in camp, which would have been excessively offensive to white men born and brought up in the free states.

To counteract the evil effects of such falsehoods, a system of public meetings was inaugurated, and the Adjutant General was sent from the War Department to the Army, by the President, to explain the method adopted by the Government for the organization of negro troops, in separate regiments, commanded by white officers and to set forth the benefits expected from their service as auxiliaries.

The first of these meetings was held at the east front of the Capitol. It was addressed by President Lincoln in person; followed by several Senators and Representatives, and others. I happened to be one of the speakers. The burden of my speech was the justice of requiring the colored people to bear their fair proportion of the burdens, perils and wastes of the war. By these means,

and by the valor of the negro troops themselves in battle, the Army and the loyal people became reconciled to this policy.

This narrative seems to justify President Lincoln's reluctance to enlist negro troops, prior to the passage of the enrollment act, his refusal to sanction the emancipation of slaves by military orders within the boundary of any state, as proposed by General Hunter in South Carolina and General Fremont in Missouri, and his apparent hesitation in issuing his emancipation proclamation. It illustrates also a marked trait of his character, namely, deliberateness in arriving at conclusions on grave questions; and his habit of following, rather than going in advance of, public opinion.

He was an earnest opponent of slavery *per se*, because he loathed injustice and tyranny. Hence his aphorism: "I know there is a God and that He hates injustice and slavery;" and his allegation, "No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent," but he was a "Henry Clay Whig," conscientiously believing that each state had the right, under the Constitution, to deal with slavery for itself, within its own limits.

He issued the emancipation proclamation and enlisted negro troops not on account of abolition sentiments but because he finally thought these

measures were necessary to preserve the Union; as was previously set forth by himself in these words: "My paramount object is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it."

Time will not permit me now to recite the incidents or other interviews of a similar character. I will only add in this connection that however much experienced statesmen may have exalted themselves above Mr. Lincoln at the beginning of the administration, on a more mature acquaintance they all found in him qualities of head and heart which commanded their highest respect and esteem. He was in fact possessed of a very wide range of information; was well versed in literature and science; could quote verbatim from standard authors by the hour; was endowed with very acute mental perceptions and trenchant logical powers; and was, consequently, masterful in debate. He was the most patient and unselfish man I ever knew, with boundless patriotism and overflowing affection and tenderness for every oppressed and suffering member of the human race. He never needlessly injured anyone, nor permitted anyone to unjustly suffer, if he could properly prevent it. Hence he could truthfully

say, "It rests me after a day's hard work if I can find a good excuse for saving a man's life."

I will only add in closing this recital that I sometimes met President Lincoln socially, when I had no "ax to grind" and no public measure to discuss; and found him most delightful company. These interviews, however, were rare for the reason that he was almost constantly, day and night, overwhelmed with official duties,—leaving him hardly time for necessary food and sleep; and I was also busy with official duties in a minor position. When they did occur they were, in a sense, of his seeking. This may seem to the uninitiated an egotistical statement, but it is not. For he could know, and I could not know when he could be spared from his almost relentless work for a few minutes or, on rare occasions, for a few hours.

When they did occur he sometimes sent for me or, when I called on official business, detained me for a little social talk; and sometimes he and Mrs. Lincoln would drive to the hotel where my family and I resided and, taking my wife and me into their carriage, drive away into the country; or to the Opera House to listen to rare music.

During these drives to the country we had, of course, unrestrained conversation with each other,—very much, I think, as if we had been members of the same family.

The last drive we had together occurred almost immediately after the fall of Richmond, and the surrender of the Confederates at Appomatox. On this occasion we four drove across the Potomac River, on Long Bridge, into Virginia, and thence in the direction of Falls Church, through the country still marred and scarred—perhaps I ought to say **devastated**—by the recent presence of the great armies who had stripped it of almost every vestige of the environments of civilized life, including its once comfortable habitations, out-buildings, orchards, field fences, gardens and ornamental shrubbery. Even the hills had been deprived of their once majestic forests of native trees.

After a long drive, occupying several hours, we returned to Washington to resume the drudgery of our respective official stations.

This drive has become to me historical;—first because it was the last one taken by me in his company and proved to have been so near the end of his life; and, secondly, because he had suddenly become, on the fall of Richmond and the surrender of the Confederate Army, April 9th, at Appomatox, a different man. His whole appearance, poise and bearing had marvelously changed. He was, in fact, transfigured. That indescribable sadness which had previously seemed to me an adamant element of his very being had been

suddenly changed for an equally indescribable expression of serene joy!—as if conscious that the great purpose of his life had been achieved. His countenance had become radiant,—emitting spiritual light something like a halo. Yet there was no manifestation of exaltation or ecstasy. He seemed the very personification of supreme satisfaction. His conversation was, of course, correspondingly exhilarating.

On the evening of April 11th, 1865, I was with him when he was serenaded at the Executive Mansion. An immense concourse of people assembled at its north front, filling the open grounds out across Pennsylvania Avenue to Lafayette Park. It was the first time he had been seen by the public after the surrender of General Lee's Army which it was intuitively felt ended the war. The people were hilarious,—almost crazy with joy. He addressed them from an upper window. Almost every sentence was smothered with applause. He spoke on the subject of the restoration of the insurrectionary states to their former position in the Union.

His speech was short; and at its close this great mass of people seemed reluctant to leave. They commenced calling for other distinguished persons, one after another, whom they conjectured might be with the President. This conjecture was erroneous. The President was almost alone. He

urged me to make a speech. With great reluctance I consented; and he introduced me as a Senator from Iowa, soon to be Secretary of the Department of the Interior.

My speech, also, was brief. My theme was "The wisdom of forbearance, now that the war was happily ended, towards our erring brethren,"—which sentiment evidently met the approval of all present.

Two days later, April 13th, I called on him at his office in the Executive Mansion, to say "Good-bye" in view of my intended departure, the following evening, for my home at Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. He seemed to be well and happy. And as I took leave, he wished me a pleasant journey and safe return. I never saw him alive again. On my way home, at Richmond, Indiana, the dreadful news reached me, by telegraph, of his assassination on the evening of April 14th, 1865.

I returned at once to Washington where I saw his body "lying in state" under a catafalque in the rotunda of the National Capitol, protected by a guard composed of Union soldiers; from whence the remains were leisurely returned by the Government to Springfield, Illinois, on the same route he had traveled four years before from his home in that City to be inaugurated President of the United States.

His body now lies at the capital city of his own state, in a great mausoleum, erected by the voluntary contribution of his fellow citizens, while his memory is enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen; and his character is revered by all good men and women throughout the world.



